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Franco-American Exhibition Diplomacy between the Wars

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Dimitrios S. Latsis

MB: The exhibition was opened by the President of the [French] Republic, I think, and various people. Then Mr. Goodyear had to give an official dinner, which he did— a luncheon in the Salon des Aigles of the Trianon for the same people. [...] And what did the French like? They liked, above all, the naive pictures and they liked that picture called American Gothic—help me—who is it by?
PC: Grant Wood.
MB: By Grant Wood, yes. That's what they liked.
PC: Really?
NB: Yes.
PC: That's fascinating.[1]

1 Margaret Scolari Barr, the wife of MoMA's director Alfred Barr Jr., was still surprised with the taste of the French when she gave this oral history interview to the Archives of American Art in 1976, thirty-six years after the exhibition of American Art that the museum organized in Paris. After all, wasn't MoMA supposed to be the arbiter of American modernism, the institution that would finally legitimate American art within international modernism? It was also within MoMA's circle that the "American Scene" (and to an extent representational art of a "national character" as a whole) was dismissed as "caricatures," "nationalisms that involved violent propaganda against modern foreign art" (Barr Jr., 1938, 30). Barr's surprise or feigned surprise at Wood's popularity, her pretense at not knowing who one of the most famous American paintings was by is surely testament to the broader disconnect that scholars like Wanda Corn and Erika Doss have diagnosed between the representational art of a national character that proliferated during the New Deal and the onset of modern abstraction after the War.[2] This clear-cut distinction between pre-war and post-war American art that anoints abstraction as the real representative of modernism on American soil has been challenged by scholars who have recovered an earlier avant-garde of the interwar

period. What historians of art have only just begun to trace, however, is a revisionist assessment of modernism during the pre-war years that would uncover how museums and galleries (including MoMA) that supposedly denounced anything that reeked of provincialism in American art actually came to champion its chief representatives during the 1930s. As will become apparent, what counted as American modernism, especially in an international context, in the 1930s was completely different from the term's definition in the 1940s.

2 During the interwar period and especially during the New Deal, a concerted, government-led attempt was made for the first time to promote a unified American national artistic scene to the world and particularly to Europe. That this new-found internationalism coincided chronologically with the dominance of an American regionalist aesthetic during the decade before the onslaught of post-War abstraction is not at all a matter of serendipity. Americanist scholars within "new art history" have increasingly addressed artistic production in the 1930s from a resolutely transnational and social viewpoint, in a way that respects the artistic, political and practical exigencies of the day and tries to get beyond the various dividing "isms."[3] One of the chief but now forgotten testaments to this unique moment in the history of American art was the government-sponsored exhibition "Three Centuries of American Art" that was organized in Paris by the Museum of Modern Art in 1938.[4] In what follows, I would like to examine its context, the selection process for artworks as well as related curatorial practices of the exhibition and its sole precedent in 1919 with particular attention on the use of "place" as a unified thematic concern for American Art, at least in the way it was presented to international audiences. The exhibition as a whole reveals a complex intertextual, intermedial web that manifests interlocking tensions around significant themes in the history of American art in the first half of the twentieth century. These include: an emerging, officially-sanctioned "narrative" for the representation of the United States not just as a world-power, but as an artistically "emancipated" nation and a glimpse into a New Deal-era attempt at cultural diplomacy before the disaster of WW II. In this context, American Art manifested a dual mobility, both in its movement from the regional to the national and international level and as a symbolic conveyor for the exchanges that took place between different media.

Geographic Scale and Political Context: Regionalism on a Global Stage

3 It is hardly necessary to rehearse here the centrality of the idea of place and the rootedness in place for the art produced under the various government programs and under the banners of the "American Scene" and Regionalism.[5] After all, this was a time when entire agencies were founded to, quite literally, reshape the national landscape on the heels of the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, agencies that bore names like "Tennessee Valley Authority," "Soil Conservation Service" and "Farm Security Administration." During the 1930s the prominence of regionalism was such that Thomas Hart Benton made the cover of *Time*,[6] and museum-goers in major metropolitan cities visited regionalist exhibitions in federal art centers and major museums (e.g. "Frontiers in American Art" and "New Horizons in American Art").[7] More broadly, geography appears to have been a true nexus of the visual culture of the period. One is thus bound to ask: was Grant Wood's hope "for a widely diffused art

among our whole people, [...] a growth of non-urban and regional activity in the arts and letters, [of] a varied, rich land, abounding in painting material" (Wood, 1999, 155) already realized, or was there something else at play?[8]

4 While looking inward to the heartland beyond the major metropolitan areas for inspiration, federal planning for the arts also began to assume an outwardly-oriented, globalized perspective. It is in this context that a major exhibition of American art was announced for Paris at the invitation of the French government. The exhibition *Trois Siècles d'Art aux États-Unis* was held at the Musée du Jeu de Paume in the Tuileries gardens in the heart of Paris from May 24 to July 31 of that year (figs 1-3). It is this exhibition and 1938 as a transitional year more broadly that can elucidate the specific place of New Deal aesthetics within the cultural diplomacy of the period.

Figure 1: Cover of the Exhibition Catalogue for "Three Centuries of American Art," Paris, 1938
Courtesy Museum of Modern Art, New York

Figure 2: The Musée du Jeu de Paume decked out in French and American flags during the exhibition
Courtesy Museum of Modern Art, New York

Figure 3: One of the exhibition galleries
Courtesy Museum of Modern Art, New York

5 Turning to a concise critical examination of the relevant historical facts surrounding the exhibit that will help illuminate the geopolitical sense of place, I would like to explore this theme particularly as it pertains to the idea of "the national" in the context of a Eurocentric international artistic stage. The interwar years, and especially the 1930s, an unprecedented consolidation of the national artistic scene in the United States sought to identify for the first time in the country's history the contours of a unified national culture, in a land whose frontier had been closed less than half a century earlier. The government additionally involved foreign artists in creative regeneration efforts gathered under the umbrella of the Works Progress

Administration (e.g. Diego Rivera's mural projects[9]) and simultaneously encouraged the "internationalization" of American art through exhibitions abroad, exchanges with foreign institutions and diplomatic initiatives under the aegis of international organizations. That this new-found internationalism coincided chronologically with the ascendance of an American regionalist aesthetic that dominated the decade before the onslaught of post-War abstraction is not at all a matter of serendipity. A consolidation of national culture was indeed perceived by contemporary and later critics to be a matter of negotiating "the national" and "the regional," that is to say the East coast-centered arbitrage of style with the heartland-derived values and iconography that imbued the palette of artists like Grant Wood and Alexandre Hogue and the photographic plates of Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange.

6 As a testament to the explicit artistic link between the regional and the national, considering some of the reactionary and oppositional voices to this trend can be instructive: well-known proponent of modernism and a "nemesis" of Grant Wood's at the University of Iowa School of Art, art historian H. W. Janson observed in 1943 that, to his consternation, "both sides seem to agree that the movement represents a national trend" while bemoaning that many "publications bestowed their blessing upon a nationalist movement that was in perfect accord with their editorial policy." For all his disappointment it seems clear even from his title––"The International Aspects of Regionalism"––that geographical terminology and scale were consistently and successfully employed in identifying the regional as a "quasi-official," national style, especially when it came to the international "face" of American art (Janson, 1943).[10] But how did this contention over geographic and style come about, and how does it relate to debates about representations of the nation?

American Art in France circa 1919: The Triumph of Tradition

7 To better understand how the battle between the regionalists and the modernists was fought, it is instructive to consider the sole precedent of the 1938 exhibition. The first stand-alone exhibition of American art in Paris (if not the first in Europe) took place in the immediate aftermath of the Great War in 1919. From October to November of that year, under the high patronage of the presidents of France and the United States and at the invitation of the French government, an exhibition of "L'École Américaine" (the American School) took place at the Musée du Luxembourg (the parent museum of the Jeu de Paume) which had since the turn of the century begun amassing works from artists of various foreign schools to complement its holdings in contemporary French Art.[11] While this show, "American Art of the Present Day," was an initiative of political and diplomatic import, the atmosphere in which it took place was very different than the one of almost twenty years later. A disastrous war had just ended and the country was, if only for a brief time, in the thralls of what Gertrude Stein subsequently described as "the Americanization of France." Public sentiment for America was very favorable, and this was reflected in the artistic field by the close collaboration of war-time artists' committees like the Fraternité des Artistes with their American counterpart, "American Artists' Committee of One Hundred."

8 Indeed it was the latter that spearheaded the organization of the exhibition under its president, French-trained landscape painter William A. Coffin (fig. 4).[12] In a climate of

cultural exchange ("propagande pacifique"), the French had prepared an exhibit of their art to tour several Eastern and Midwestern states, but it is surely American art that piqued the public's curiosity the most, having only been presented on French soil once before, albeit not in an organized manner, during the Exposition Universelle of 1900 in Paris.[13] It is as an act of courtesy to the American artists and gratitude for America's contribution during the war that their art was allowed in the august halls of French museums, such is the subtext of Léonce Bénédite's preface, as the Luxembourg's director, in the exhibition catalogue (Bénédite, 1919b, i-vi).

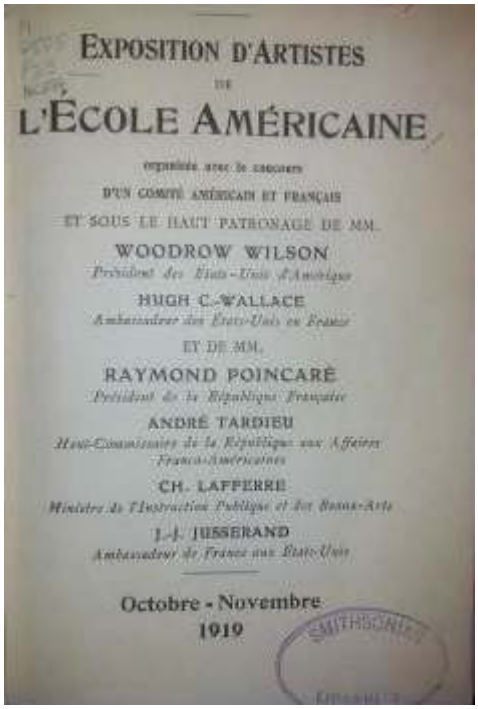
EXPOSITION D'ARTISTES
DE
L'ÉCOLE AMÉRICAINE
organisée avec le concours
D'UN COMITÉ AMÉRICAIN ET FRANÇAIS
ET SOUS LE HAUT PATRONAGE DE MM.
WOODROW WILSON
Président des États-Unis d'Amérique
HUGH C. WALLACE
Ambassadeur des États-Unis en France
ET DE MM.
RAYMOND POINCARÉ
Président de la République Française
ANDRÉ TARDIEU
Haut-Commissaire de la République aux Affaires Franco-Américaines
CH. LAFFERRE
Ministre de l'Instruction Publique et des Beaux-Arts
J.-J. JUSSERAND
Ambassadeur de France aux États-Unis
Octobre - Novembre
1919
SMITHSONIAN

Figure 4: Catalog of the 1919 exhibition, (Bénédite, 1919b)

9 The fact that these artists were grouped under a "national" school did not indicate any aesthetic homogeneity but was rather meant to emulate the conventional way of categorizing European artists of the day. Such a choice is reflected in the artists selected by the American committees, a majority of whom had either trained in France or been otherwise influenced by French artistic currents.[14] Indeed Bénédite noted elsewhere, American art can be said to come into its own as a national school at the moment it abandons the influence of the British and turns toward the French School (Bénédite, 1919a, 201)![15] This he pinpoints to the middle of the nineteenth century, the starting point of the exhibition itself. The chronological overview of the last sixty years thus proceeded with Whistler (whose "Portrait of the Artist's Mother" was the centerpiece of the exhibition, having long before been acquired by the Luxembourg), Sargent, Cassatt, Tarbell, Thayer, and Weir, with some representatives of the more contemporary generation of Luks, Sloan and Glackens.

10 Depictions of the American land were certainly present on the walls of the Luxembourg that fall, but filtered through the style of the Écoles of Fontainebleau and of Barbizon, with some Giverny-based American impressionists to boot.[16] To be accepted into the broader academic tradition, American art needed to behave like a good *filiale* (branch) of the French School, a variation of familiar French pastoral themes. Even French president Raymond Poincaré who inaugurated the exhibit admitted "being very

interested in its appeal and especially so in its American character, in spite of the fact that most of the artists had worked under French masters," dealing another backhanded compliment. In her comparative examination of the 1919 and 1938 exhibitions from a French museological perspective, Jocelyne Rotily has surmised as much, claiming that "the war of the moment was that between the modernists and the traditionalists" and that it was decided that "no American cubist artist would feature at the Luxembourg. Figurative, impressionist and realist art won the day decidedly." (Rotily, 1997, 178)[17] It is indicative that even the work of the younger artists selected (e.g. Paul Manship) was very conservative, sticking to hunt scenes, idylls and the tenets of turn-of-century bourgeois portraiture.

11 More telling however, were the names of those selected by the Americans that the French refused to hang, occasioning a controversy that almost escalated into a diplomatic episode.[18] From the one hundred and twenty-five painters, twenty sculptors and the twenty-four artists residing abroad that were selected by the committee as representatives of American art, ten of them did not end up in the exhibition, including William Zorach, Joseph Stella, Rockwell Kent, Max Weber and Charles Sheeler. Apart from their youth (all were younger than forty at the time) these artists also had in common that they belonged to the advance guard of artistic currents in the United States, as much removed from the work of Whistler and Homer (whom the French had already acquired for their museums) as the young Duchamp was from the spirit of the salons.[19] Despite Coffin's hope that "the collection as sent from [the US] was to stand on its own merits, no matter what may be the judgment of Paris critics," one cannot help but agree in the final analysis with the excluded artists' declaration that "the French authorities have dealt an insulting blow to the modern art movement in America which is attempting to free itself from the bonds of convention."[20]

12 American art, it seems, was welcome to cross the Atlantic, free to enter the salons, just as long as it complied with dominant European tastes. Instead of Stella's bold and now iconic "Brooklyn Bridge" (1917) and Sheeler's "Barn Abstraction" (1917), the French accommodated American expats' landscapes of their adopted homelands and such pastoral academicisms as Oliver-Dennet Grover's "Mountain, sea and clouds" (1911) and Birge Harrison's "Moonlight on the River" (1919).[21] In this context, it is hardly surprising that no consideration was accorded to modern art forms like photography and film that were then producing such radical depictions of space and place as Stieglitz's cloud studies and Paul Strand's and Charles Sheeler's *Manhatta* (1921).

13 The focus would soon change however and new media and mass culture would come to the fore already in the 1920s when a new exhibition of American art was already in the planning stages.[22] It took until 1938 for it to be actually staged, but in the meantime the sense that the politics of national identity had infiltrated aesthetics and that "the psychology of an individual and of a people is nowhere more discernible than in the characteristic expression through the medium of any art," only grew.[23] The Federal Art Program encouraged an unabashedly popular expression where the representation of place came to occupy a central place.

Curating the Nation: Geography, Politics and Cultural Diplomacy

14 Indicative of this boosterism was the fact that the 1938 exhibition prominently proclaimed in its title that this was to be a comprehensive, chronological and multimedia presentation of "Three Centuries of American Art." The American artistic establishment was determined to make a grand entrance onto the platform provided by the French by emphasizing both duration and variety. Exhibitions from a dozen other countries had taken place from 1931 to 1939 at the same space, the "Jeu de Paume–Annexe du Luxembourg for contemporary foreign schools" set aside by the French government for twice-yearly international showcases, including: Portugal and Poland (1931), China (1933), Belgium and Italy (1935), Spain (1936). But no other country seemed quite as anxious as the US to proclaim that it had a *three-hundred-year* artistic tradition, even if art from most of the above nations predated American art by hundreds or even thousands of years. Additionally, as borne out by the respective catalogs, the American was the only exhibition to embrace all visual art forms (painting, sculpture, architecture, folk art, photography and cinema) with various departments and curators responsible for each section, the better to testify to the "birth of a national art in a new nation," as Minister of National Education and Fine Arts Jean Zay noted in his preface (Musée du Jeu de Paume, 1938, vi).[24]

15 It would be a mistake to neglect the broader geopolitical framework in which these cultural exchanges took place, in an era when it had become clear that the pacification and solidarity projects of the interwar period had irreparably failed. On the eve of the outbreak of World War II, amidst a rapidly militarizing social environment, in Germany, France and across Europe, attempts at cultural collaboration were thus viewed as a last gasp to achieve some measure of international understanding. More particularly, US participation in this cultural diplomacy can be seen as bridging WPA-era policies, state sponsorship of the arts and the "social arts" of the "Age of Roosevelt," to later Cold War programs that again projected an Americanism on an international stage, albeit with very different intentions.[25] The international image of American culture and art underwent significant recalibrations as evidenced, in part, by the multiplicity of subsequent federal government-produced films like *People of the Cumberland* (1938), *Power and the Land* (1940), *Men and Dust* (1940) *The Land* (1942), *Native Land* (1942) and *Wild River* (1960), or the continuous promotion of the art of Charles Sheeler and Ansel Adams, among other government- and foundation-sponsored artists.[26]

16 The curious nature of this public-private partnership in the interest of the promotion of American Art and, more specifically, the foregrounding of a nationalistic aesthetic as 'officially' American, accounts for the reasons why the Museum of Modern Art, the premier arbiter of modernism in America came to briefly champion art that would later be considered retrograde by its own standards. If MoMA acted as a *de facto* ministry of culture and national cinémathèque in the absence of directly equivalent government agencies in the United States, it is because of the increased interest and patronage of the federal government for the arts during the Great Depression, especially when it came to crafting an outwardly visible national narrative. MoMA, as is well known, went on to champion non-representational art and, through its cache in the international museum arena was one of the many catalysts for New York to "steal the idea of modern

art" from Paris, as Serge Guilbaut has argued (Guilbaut, 1985). But for a brief period after its foundation in the 1930s, the Museum pioneered the display of American arts and crafts through the patronage of rich collectors and curators that were eager to showcase a robust artistic scene growing in their native land.

17 Representations of the land and the city, albeit of a completely different style than in the 1919 exhibition and to a considerable extent emancipated from French tastes, functioned as a running, moving thread through the historical narrative of "Three Centuries of American Art" and as a structuring motif of the artworks themselves, with the prime example of *The River*.[27] Such a connecting thread was necessitated by the fact that this exhibition was the only one hosted by the French government that was not curated by a central national organization responsible for culture, be it a ministry or a council, as none such existed (nor exists) in an American context. It was thus imperative for the disparate elements of the exhibition—both historical and contemporary, many of which depending on the personal taste of private individuals from whose collections they had been selected—to be unified under a single semantic and stylistic umbrella of some coherency. Consequently, the evolutionary progression of this three-hundred-year chronology is also the story of an uninterrupted technological remediation of the land starting with the painter's palette and ending with the motion picture camera. As noted by Jocelyne Rotily, "behind the galleries of portraits and landscapes, one finds a testament to the American appetite for a mystical nature and its realistic visual representation" (Rotily 1998, 168).

18 "Three Centuries of American Art" was designed as a broad overview from colonial times through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries but with contemporary works that "reveal distinctly American characteristics," representing "two thirds of the exhibit."[28] Artworks from the 1930s that were featured last as "contemporary" in each segment of the exhibition were thus showcased as the "culmination" of a tradition that had throughout American history strived for and finally accomplished emancipation from older European models. The exhibition catalog highlighted "contemporary" work carried out under the "New Deal" for the Tennessee Valley Authority and other governmental artistic projects, including mural paintings and documentary photography (fig. 5). This chronology was articulated in seven sections: History, Technology, Literature, Architecture, Painting/Sculpture/Graphic Arts, Photography and Cinema. It is both an excellent example of teleological art historiography (in this case from 1600 to 1938) and an encapsulation of the curators' search for "equivalences" in the parallel development of the various arts, including cinema. It also corroborates the hypothesis that technology (which here occupies one of the seven chronological streams) and the idea of "the region" were the grounding themes of a "national" conception of art history in the US at the time, at least as it was compiled for international consumption.

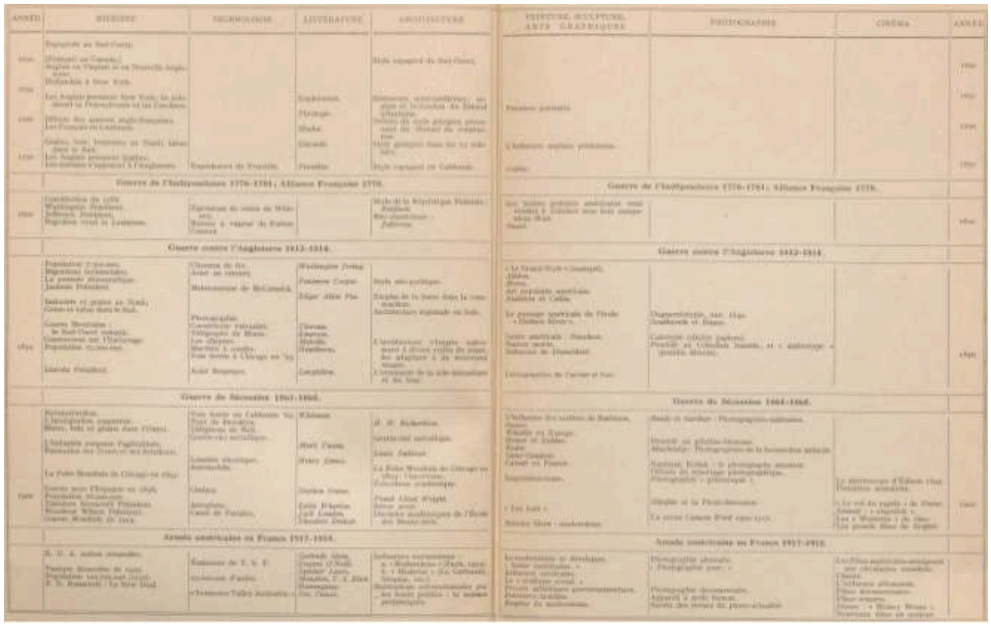

Figure 5: Comparative Chronology of the Arts in the Unites States (from the exhibition catalog Musée du Jeu de Paume 1938)

Courtesy Museum of Modern Art, New York

19 When one looks at the selection process for contemporary artworks that were to be included in the exhibition, a clear pattern emerges. The Museum invited "forty living American artists" to "make [their] own selection and from them certain canvases [were] chosen for the Paris Exhibition." Among those invited were all four preeminent regionalist painters, Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, Alexander Hogue and John Steuart Curry, whose names in relevant press materials were emphatically accompanied by their home states and cities (Iowa City, IA; Kansas City, MO; Dallas, TX and Madison, WI respectively).[29] The curators stressed that it was their goal to represent "all parts of the United States" as opposed to the Eastern-seaboard concentrated modernist schools.[30] Almost all the works chosen by the four regionalists featured portrayals of typically American places, including Curry's "The Gospel Train" (1929) and Wood's "Study for 'Dinner for Threshers'" (1934). These were supplemented by works like Charles Sheeler's precisionist "American Landscape" (1930)—one of his industrial, Ford-inspired "landscapes,"—William Groper's "Dustland" (1937), and Edward Hopper's "East Wind over Weehawken" (1934). Moreover, the only two works that the French officials chose to purchase and permanently feature in the museum after the conclusion of the exhibit were Hogue's "Drought Survivors" (1936),[31] a rendition of the Dust Bowl's natural desolation, and Joseph Stella's "American Landscape" (1929).[32] One was of a country scene, the other of a city scene and to this day both hang in the Musée National d'Art Moderne.[33]

20 If it was impossible to "tell the full story [of American Art] within the limits prescribed for this exhibition," as MoMA president A. Conger Goodyear noted in his foreword to the catalog, some of the curators' overview essays dedicated to each art are indicative of the contestation over the meaning and characteristics of "a national school" both historically and as of the late 1930s (Musée du Jeu de Paume, 1938, viii). In his section on "Painting and Sculpture," museum director Alfred Barr presented to the French public—"the most critical in the world" (18)—a brief outline of the evolution of these two arts in the New World. Barr's insistence on the importance of space for the

definition of an American artistic tradition is striking. After parsing the end of the eighteenth-century tradition with its "early examples of the American panoramic landscape" (21), he proceeds to the work of frontier naturalist and painter John James Audubon (22) and to that of Currier and Ives. He considers their lithographs as having ushered in a "new mechanical age" for fine art by recording nature "for the common man with a robust and shameless sense of the picturesque" (23). Barr also cataloged nineteenth-century genres with reference to their more familiar French counterparts (the Barbizon school features prominently [23]) and dwelled on the work of many landscapists like Inness (25) and the early twentieth-century "American Impressionists" (26-7). But, more importantly, it is in his unsympathetic yet very perceptive account of Regionalism (not unlike the one by Janson) under the subtitle "internationalist modernism," that his stance surfaces (figs 6-11).

Figures 6-11: The Evolution of the National Landscape: Installation Photographs from the Painting, Sculpture and Graphic Arts Sections of *Three Centuries of American Art*

Courtesy Museum of Modern Art, New York

21 "The American Scene," writes Barr "[has] a mixed feeling, half satirical, half nostalgic, for the awkward and rapidly disappearing environment in which most Americans have grown up" (29), an assessment that accords with many critics' regret over the "socially irresponsible nostalgic outlook" of painters like Wood who worked under "government patronage." Barr singles out Benton and Wood as exemplifying a "specific provincial or regional flavor [with many] idiosyncratic aspects":

> Such 19th-century artists as Bingham, Homer and Eakins had of course painted the American scene, too, as had the later Bellows, Sloan and Hart but not with the self-conscious nationalism and regionalism of the current movement—nationalism which has involved violent propaganda against modern foreign art and its influence; regionalism which has expressed a healthy revolt against New York's

> influence upon American taste. [...] The American public has at last taken a real interest in American painting. And even though this enthusiasm is aroused primarily by the immediate appeal of the subject matter, it is certainly better than the suspicious indifference with which the fine arts are ordinarily regarded in the modern world (30).

22 It is indeed to his credit that, despite his skepticism over "a bureaucracy with liberal sympathies" that sponsored the regionalists as "official art" (31) and regionalism's pronounced xenophobia, Barr recognized that, no matter what his own aesthetics preferences were, government patronage had brought about "a renaissance of public art" that was finally "closer to the taste and understanding of the American people" (32).[34] This achievement had come about through the identification of the regional with the national. Here regionalism mediates between the image that a country has of the status quo in its domestic cultural production and the one it projects abroad as the more or less artificially unified totality of a "national school."

23 One could well ask: how did Barr, an international modernist through and through, get to the point of praising regionalist art, the aesthetic that would become anathema to the Museum just a few short years later? While an overview of the development of MoMA's curatorial policies is outside the purview of this article, it should be noted that during the New Deal and the early WW II period, the museum came to be associated with federally-coordinated art and cultural programs to an unprecedented degree, something that has not been properly acknowledged in the extant institutional histories.[35] In this respect, a figure like one-time MoMA director and later head of the Federal Art Program of the WPA Holger Cahill was of crucial importance.[36] Relevant records demonstrate that it was because of the intervention of Cahill, his wife, MoMA curator Dorothy Miller, and FAP state director for New York Audrey McMahon that the museum undertook to function as an official representative of US art. It was also Cahill's intervention that ensured the conspicuous participation of WPA and "American Scene" artists in the exhibition and influenced the selection of government-produced films like *The River*.[37] Cahill hosted a nationally syndicated NBC radio show on American art under the auspices of the Museum and co-wrote the influential *Art in America: A Complete Survey* with Alfred Barr (Cahill and Barr, 1935).[38] Cahill was asked by Barr to "cooperate with him in selecting characteristic project work to be shown in Paris" and served on the exhibition committee.[39] The reverse was also true with Barr and multiple MoMA trustees serving on the FAP regional advisory committee of the New York Metropolitan Area.[40] Barr himself noted that "on several occasions the Museum cooperated with the federal government in the interests of American art and architecture" (Barr, 1939-40).

24 Even the curator of *Three Centuries of American Art*, A. Conger Goodyear, affirmed this regionalist perspective when he set out the exhibition's main goal as presenting to Europe the art of the Western hemisphere, which had up to then been a "terra incognita" to the artistic circles of the Old World. Further, he explained the chronological and geographic layout of the exhibition in terms that are highly reminiscent of official government policies targeted to the whole country and not just the main metropolitan areas:

> The experiment of holding a geographic exhibition was tried in the Sixteen Cities Show held in the Museum four years ago. The result was not too happy. Nevertheless, the principle of country-wide selection has been kept in mind. Furthermore, the canvases included present a cross-section of the more important

> tendencies in our contemporary art from the academic to the abstract with emphasis on the American Scene (Goodyear, 1938, 17).

25 The transition to a non-New-York-centric model of representing the nation was never going to be without controversies, with the taint of provincialism ever haunting American Art. From Goodyear's statement, however, it is clear that decentralization had expanded from New Deal economic policy to official thinking about the arts and thus "The American Scene" was going to have to play a major role in capturing what is most "American" about American art circa 1938. This spirit of using the region as a stand-in for the entire country in an international forum is perfectly captured in one of the displays from the architectural section where various American regions are matched to visual representations of different building styles and these in turn to correspondent European regions where they were also found (figs. 12 and 13).

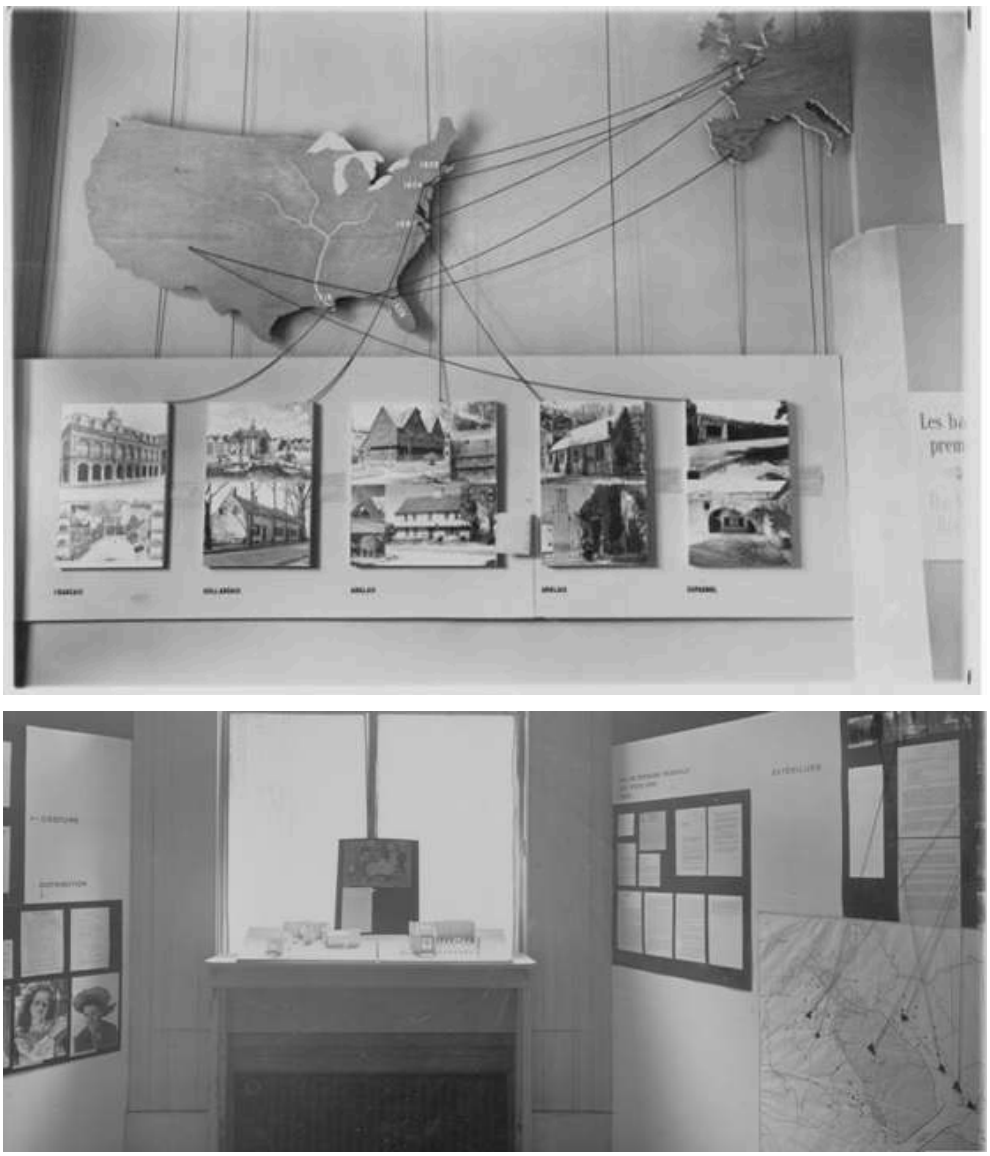

Figure 13 et 14: The Region-The Nation-The World: Visualizing Location in the Architecture and Film Sections of the Exhibition

Courtesy Museum of Modern Art, New York

Reception and Afterlives

26 It is clear that if American attitudes toward region and the land had changed in the intervening years, the European reception of the 1938 exhibition was not much better than that of its predecessor in 1919. E.A. Jewell recited the Old World's overwhelmingly negative reviews of the artistic production of the New World:[41] a critic for the *Sunday Times* of London, for instance, diagnosed as "the characteristic defect" of American art, "a rather complacent provincialism which mistakes preoccupation with a local scene, with a national style" (59) while at the same time finding "the landscapes having made a better impression than figure subjects" (60). The overwhelmingly repeated and pointed comments as to the relative youth and "primitivism" of American art (when compared with its continental counterparts) notwithstanding, "have we," Jewell asks, "an American art? That is to say, have we an art that, at any stage, deserves to be considered definitely American, in spirit, in flavor, in its idiom and accent, in technical performance, as in theme?" (29), implicitly summarizing the main argument of his treatise which is, in truth, but a reformulation of the position of nativist artistic discourse dating from the days of Thomas Cole and Walt Whitman. It seems that the only thing the French liked was American cinema. For instance, writer Maurice Sachs, who looked down on the other artworks, nonetheless praised the cinema and architecture sections as examples of a new art that "can ignore antique European traditions" (43), an art "plenty of zest and movement" (58). To French snobbism, Jewell replies with General Grant's defiant pronouncement: "I propose to fight it out on this line if it takes all summer!"

27 Despite Jewell's defiance, something had fundamentally changed in international relations and 1938 marked a certain terminus both for attempts at cultural diplomacy between nations and for geography (in the aesthetic and political sense) as a central concern of representational American Art.[42] The Paris exhibition was the first and (for a long time) last opportunity to "promote the terms of an artistic Americanism" in an international forum (Rotily, 1997, 188). It was also the last gasp of the New Deal art programs that began to be winded down shortly thereafter with the FAP being progressively defunded in 1941. The "American Scene" movement for a national art "with roots sinking deeper and deeper, day by day, into the soil" had "declined" irrevocably as E.A. Jewell noted in 1939, under the realization that "just painting farmyard silos or urban skyscrapers or native 'types' will not suffice to bring an artist into his patrimony" (Jewell, 1939, 202-3). Thomas Hart Benton remembered that "as soon as World War II began, substituting in the public mind a world concern for the specifically American concerns which had prevailed during our rise, Wood, Curry and I found the bottom knocked out from under us" (Benton, 1951, 10). By 1946 the tides at the museum had already turned and the show "Fourteen Americans" had not a figure in common with 1937's "Forty Leading American Artists." The 1946 catalog pointedly remarked that

> [for these artists] the idiom is American but there is no hint of regionalism or chauvinistic tendency. On the contrary, there is a profound consciousness that the world of art is one world and that it contains the Orient no less than Europe and the Americas. (Miller, 1946, 8)

28 After the regrettable progressive marginalization of regionalism and the American Scene from the artistic mainstream, representations of the nation would be interchangeable with the production of official government propaganda, of a highly

codified and controlled variety. Private initiative, on the other hand, flourished (always under supervision) and MoMA inaugurated its new building in 1939 and contributed considerably to the artistic dimension of the World's Fair in New York that year. The Jeu de Paume Museum in Paris had a more tragic fate as it was turned into storage space for the art confiscated by the occupying German forces, while Popular Front aesthetics fizzed out in France, much as the hope for a mass, democratic, collective American art did on the other side of the Atlantic. Grant Wood and Thomas Hart Benton gave way to Norman Rockwell and, soon, to Jackson Pollock. In Europe, a failed painter-turned-dictator was preparing to wreak havoc on the continent by invading Poland.

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NOTES

1. "Oral history interview with Margaret Scolari Barr concerning Alfred H. Barr, 1974 Feb. 22-May 13," Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. The interviewer was Paul Cummings.
2. Cf. Corn, 2000 and Doss, 1995. In a French context Benayada, 2005, has also addressed the 'purported' split between modernism and regionalism during this period from a sociological point of view. Rather than opposition, however, she finds both to be aesthetic constructs of intersecting aims; Cf. also Benayada, 2009.
3. Cf. Groseclose and Wierich, 2009 (especially contributions by Andrew Hemingway and Derrick Cartwright) and Lauren Kroiz, 2012, 184-6.
4. The catalogue is Musée du Jeu de Paume, 1938. The exhibition was partly funded by the Federal Arts Program of the Works Progress Administration.
5. The literature on art during this period is burgeoning but for an overview see the entries for "Federal Art Project" and "Regionalism" in Young and Young, 2007 and for "Regionalism" and "Works Progress Administration/Federal Art Project" in Marter, 2011.
6. Issue of December 24, 1934, vol 24, n°26.
7. At the De Young Museum (San Francisco) and MoMA (New York) respectively. The Whitney and the Museum of Modern both had exhibition series that featured, on a rotating geographical basis, art from around the country, often complemented by WPA/FAP holdings. For a good reference source on exhibitions and their reception Cf. Kalfatovic, 1994.
8. Originally published as a pamphlet: Grant Wood, *Revolt Against the City*, Iowa City (IA), Clio Press, 1935.
9. Cf. the reference to Rivera, Orozco and others in the context of depression-era art project in the exhibition catalog as manifesting "an awareness of social, political and economic problems," (Musée du Jeu de Paume, 1938, 30-31).
10. Janson's article appeared after a Wood retrospective at the Art Institute of Chicago that coincided with that year's meeting of the College Art Association. His allegations of press "propaganda" alludes to the political dimensions of the regionalist project. Thomas Hart Benton's ambitions were to "link his regionalist vision of modern art with the reform-oriented politics of his time," explicitly saying that "Roosevelt's early social moves [...] found their aesthetic expression in Regionalism" which he also called an overwhelming Americanism, cf. Doss, 1995, 68. For the promotion of the regionalist aesthetic in public, no other instance is more representative than the article "U.S. Scene" published on December 24, 1934 issue of *Time* (cf. note 6 above) whose cover featured Thomas Hart Benton in a self-portrait.
11. On the history and the context of the exhibition cf. Rotily, 1996, 86-99 and 132-9. As Rotily notes, the exhibition was financed partly by the Propaganda Service of the French State (*ibid.*, note 103).
12. Coffin had been responsible for the art exhibit of the 1901 Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo among other initiatives. For the organization of the 1919 exhibition, cf. the documents of

the "Luxembourg committee" in William Anderson Coffin papers, 1886-1924, Series 5: Project File for the Exhibition of Works by American Artists at the Luxembourg Museum in Paris, 1919-1920, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC. Cf. also http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/william-anderson-coffin-papers-7476/more.

13. The question whether America has a native art was thus posed abroad before the twentieth century, by critics like Georges Lafenestre writing about the art of the American exhibit of the 1889 Exposition Universelle ("one might think he is in the midst of a gallery of French art") and John B Cauldwell, the curator of the American exhibit during the 1900 World's Fair, who retorted that America did have a native art that could rival the European Schools; cf. the summary of the debates in a review of the 1919 exhibition (Bénédite, 1919a, 193-210), from which I draw below. For the presence of American art in earlier World's Fairs, cf. Cohen-Solal, 2001 (especially Part I).

14. All of the works chosen were either oil paintings or sculptures, a further difference from the 1938 exhibition which incorporated popular art forms, folk art, industrial art, architecture and cinema.

15. Bénédite himself poses the usual question ("is there truly an American School?" [198]) and proceeds to preferentially cite examples of American artists of French descent, like John La Farge and Augustus Saint-Gaudens.

16. Richard Emil Miller, Frederick Carl Frieseke and others were represented. For a representative work included in the exhibition, cf. http://www.musee-orsay.fr/fr/collections/catalogue-des-oeuvres/notice.html?no_cache=1&S=&nnumid=02041.

A press release written by the American committee for "La France: An American Magazine," noted that "the collection of pictures sent from the United States is very strong in landscape" and that "there are so many typical American subjects interpreted by the landscape painters that the collection is somewhat different from the assemblages of pictures usually seen in European exhibition galleries," later conceding however that many are "in the style that is sometimes referred to as "Academic." Cf. "An Exhibition of American Art at the Luxembourg Museum, Paris" [undated press release], William A. Coffin papers, Archives of American Art.

17. Rotily, who is the only published source on the 1919 and 1938 exhibitions, has mined the archives of the Louvre and her perspective is useful and complementary to the account I present below that relies on American archives (Museum of Modern Art, Archives of American Art). Cf. also her monograph (Rotily, 1998) as well as the references in Harper Stratford, 2001, 31-3.

18. I quote below from the petitions, minutes and letters in the Coffin papers, AAA. It is also notable that artists who had publicly allied themselves with Germany during the war had been excluded a priori.

19. See the resolution of protest of the committee for the American Exhibition contained in "Communication sent to the Ministre de l'Instruction et des Beaux Arts, January 9, 1920," in William A Coffin papers, AAA, noting that the artists had been selected "by a unanimous vote of the committee."

20. Cf. respectively Coffin's October 10, 1919 letter to and the artists' petition dated December 29, 1919, both in Coffin papers, AAA.

21. The French government actually acquired the latter, in addition to nine other paintings following the exhibition, a practice that was repeated in 1938.

22. Cf. Rotily, 1997, 179. Some of the pieces for the 1938 exhibition had already been pre-selected and exhibited as far back as 1933 in the Century of Progress World's Fair in Chicago. On the history and the conception of the 1938 exhibition, cf. Goodyear, 1943, the first history of MoMA by Goodyear, the overall coordinator of the show who deemed it important enough to give it its own chapter (73-82). Cf. also Rotily, 1998, 149-80.

23. "Notable Exhibition of American Art now shown in Paris through Courtesy [sic] of French Government," *The Evening Post, New York*, October 14, 1919. Ben Foster's "October, Moonrise" (1917) occupies a quarter of the page of this review.

24. Zay points out that the hundreds of artworks brought over from the US had been shipped on the SS *Lafayette* named after the Franco-American general and patriot, in a "symbolic and moving gesture," also mentioned by Jewell, 1939, 11-12 (cf. also MoMA press release n°38418-17 of April 20, 1938 and Goodyear, 1943, 77). By a remarkable coincidence, the art for the earlier exhibition of the "American School" in 1919 had also been shipped on the SS *Lafayette* after the initial steamship route was cancelled; cf. William A Coffin's November 13, 1919 letter to Mrs W.W. Quinton in William Anderson Coffin papers, 1886-1924, Series 5: Project File for the Exhibition of Works by American Artists at the Luxembourg Museum in Paris, 1919-1920, Archives of American Art, Washington, DC.

25. Most prominently initiated, after the War, by the United States Information Agency. A lot of these activities were covered by the US government-published journals *Encounter* (a Ford Foundation-CIA funded venture, nominally published by the Congress for Cultural Freedom) and *Amerika* (1944-1967); cf. Dizard, 2004, chapters 3 and 9. For a joint consideration of 1930s and Cold War cultural diplomacy, cf. Andrew Hemingway's article in Groseclose and Wierich, 2009. Significantly, the Office of War Information, the direct predecessor of USIA, itself evolved from the Office of Facts and Figures that had been set-up before the war.

26. Frank Ninkovich cites 1938 as the official start of American cultural diplomacy with the establishment of the Division of Cultural Relations within the State Department in July of that year, the very same summer as "Three Centuries of American Art was held in Paris." See Ninkovich, 1981, 26-34, where the author also considers the competing Axis initiatives.

27. On the contrast in aesthetic between the two exhibitions, cf. in addition to Rotily, 1997, Wiesinger, 1993, and specifically the section "La Politique d'Expositions temporaires," (271-3).

28. MoMA press release no 371103-35, n. pag, announcing the opening on November 8 1937 of a preview of the "Paris retrospective exhibition" that had been put together for the New York public.

29. MoMA press release n°371103-35 of November 11, 1937.

30. MoMA press release n°38418-17 of April 20, 1938. Indeed the New York Ashcan School as well the late 1930s wave of abstraction was minimally represented in the exhibition. Ironically, the Museum of Modern Art (as is well known) subsequently went on to become the chief champion of American modernism, mainly through its patronage of Abstract expressionism.

31. http://museefrancoamericain.fr/objet/les-rescapes-de-la-secheresse-1936.

32. http://www.walkerart.org/collections/artworks/american-landscape.

33. MoMA press release n°39109-1 of January 11, 1939. Hogue's "Drought Survivors" is now on permanent loan from the National Museum of Modern Art in Paris to the Franco-American Museum of Blérancourt. For provenance of the individual works, cf. also Musée du Jeu de Paume, 1938, 18-58.

34. As noted by Rotily, 1997, 182. On regionalism as nationalism and vice versa in this period, cf. Benayada, 2009 and most recently, Doss, 2013, 14-5.

35. Compare for instance a newer study like Sitton's, 2014, which devotes several chapters to these years when, in Sitton's terms, the museum became a virtual adjunct department of the federal government, with an older history like Lynes, 1973, which quickly rushes past this entire period.

36. MoMA President A Conger Goodyear would later remember, "then [in 1932] began the flood of Americana under Cahill's direction" (Goodyear, 1943, 41). On Cahill and his wife's role at MoMA, cf. *ibid.*, 91-2.

37. MoMA was in constant communication with the Federal Art Program during the second half of the 1930s. It organized exhibitions like "TVA Architecture," "Houses and Housing (Federal Housing Authority)," "Documents of America (Farm Security Administration)" "Posters, Spanish and US Government," in addition to an exhibition of watercolors from the Index of American Design, permanent loans of FAP work for MoMA's collection and the major exhibit "New

Horizons in American Art" (1936) with 300 works by 225 artists all drawn from the WPA Art Project. Holger Cahill was "responsible for several of the Museum's most original and influential American shows, publications and broadcasts and served as a constant friend and adviser to the Museum in its work on American Painting and Sculpture." Cf. "American Art and the Museum," 1940, 4. MoMA both provided and received grants to the FAP (including in connection with the Paris exhibition), cf. *ibid.*, "Collaboration with the United States Government on Behalf of American Art," 17. Four paintings and one sculpture by Project artists from the government's collection and several others belonging to private collectors were among those exhibited in Paris. I would like to thank Virginia Mecklenburg of the Smithsonian American Art Museum for her guidance in my research on this aspect of the exhibition.

38. The book dwells on landscape on multiple instances: "The Hudson River School and its Heirs" (45-7), "Three Landscape Painters and a solitary—Inness, Martin, Wyant, Ryder" (71-6) etc. A draft for this last chapter in Cahill's papers at the National Archives reads "The landscape school of painting of the Nineteenth Century was an outgrowth of the sense of nationalism that was prevalent in American at the time." Cf. Federal Art Project General Project File, ca. 1936 - ca. 1940, Box 4: Correspondence and Memoranda, Record Group, 69, National Archives and Records Administration (College Park, MD).

39. Memorandum by Cahill to Ellen Woodward, November 13, 1937. Federal Art Project General Project File, ca. 1936 - ca. 1940, Box 4: Correspondence and Memoranda, Record Group, 69, National Archives and Records Administration (College Park, MD). Cahill adds, "it will be the most outstanding exhibition of American Art sent to Europe in our time. I hope we can get a good project representation." Indeed government-sponsored work was represented in nearly all the sections of the exhibition: in addition to *The River* shown as part of the film program, paintings by Cameron Booth, Louis Guglielmi and Jack Levine, a sculpture by Concetta Scaravaglione, architectural models of PWA housing and photography by Walker Evans, Theodor Jung, Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee and Ben Shahn were all courtesy of the FAP. Cf. n°15, 68, 110, 221, 338, 343, 344, 345, 359 in the catalog Musée du Jeu de Paume, 1938. Jocelyne Rotily stresses the influence of FAP's promotion of a popular American art in assembling the exhibition, cf. Rotily, 1997, 185-6. On Cahill and Barr's collaboration, cf. Rotily, 1996, 173.

40. Cf. O'Connor, 1969, 32.

41. The negative reviews of *Trois Siècles d'Art aux États-Unis* and its subsequent iteration in London, are among the only features covered in the relevant bibliography. In addition to the summary provided in Jewell, 1939 (chapters 2 on the Paris exhibition and 3 on the London counterpart—hereinafter cited parenthetically in-text), cf. Alexander, 1997, 74; Love, 1999, 748-9 and Goodyear, 1943, 78-80. As Goodyear notes, "one great New York newspaper [*NY Times*] devoted its art pages for three successive Sundays to examining European critical opinions. [...] The verdict—an 'overwhelming denial' that there is an American art."

42. I am purposefully limiting my discussion to 'exhibition diplomacy.' The wider context of Franco-American diplomacy would have to account for a range of other initiatives that started much earlier than the inter-war period; cf. Kennedy, Meslay and Fink, 2006 and, more recently, McCullough, 2011.

ABSTRACTS

In 1938 the Museum of Modern Art organized a US government-funded, multi-disciplinary exhibition in Paris, entitled "Three Centuries of American Art." In this paper I explore the geopolitical, aesthetic and cultural dimensions of the exhibition as an episode of cultural diplomacy in Franco-American relations and as an attempt to promote, for the first time, an American 'national artistic scene' to the world. Special focus is placed on the selection of artworks and on curatorial practice. A comparison is offered with the sole precedent: an exhibition of American Art staged immediately after the end of WW I. A complex intertextual and intermedial web emerges from this comparison that reveals various tensions around an emerging "narrative" for the self-representation of the United States as a world-power and an artistically "emancipated" nation and provides a glimpse into a New Deal-era attempt at cultural diplomacy on the eve of WW II. These poles ultimately converge to indicate the role that "region" and "place" assumed in the American imaginary of the nineteenth century as it reverberated in interesting political and aesthetic ways in the first decades of the twentieth.

En 1938, le Museum of Modern Art organise une exposition multidisciplinaire à Paris financée par le gouvernement des États-Unis et intitulée « Trois siècles d'art aux États-Unis ». Cet article est une enquête sur les dimensions géopolitiques, esthétiques et culturelles de l'exposition, considérée comme un épisode de diplomatie culturelle marquant des relations franco-américaines et comme une tentative de promouvoir, pour la première fois, une « scène artistique nationale » américaine dans le monde. L'accent est mis sur le processus de sélection d'œuvres d'art. Une comparaison est établie avec le seul précédent : une exposition d'art américain organisée juste après la fin de la Première Guerre mondiale en 1919. Un tissu intertextuel et intermédial complexe se dégage de cette comparaison qui révèle diverses tensions autour du « récit » de l'auto-représentation des États-Unis en tant que puissance mondiale et artistiquement "émancipée" à la veille de la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Ces pôles finalement convergent pour indiquer le rôle qu'occupent les notions de « région » et de « lieu » dans l'imaginaire américain du XIXe siècle, tel qu'il se répercuta au plan politique et esthétique dans les premières décennies du XXe siècle.

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